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ABSTRACT

In 1991, a study was conducted at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) to determine the characteristics of and major problems confronting adult students with English as a second language (ESL). A questionnaire was distributed to the 105 CCRI students enrolled in ESL I, ESL II, and Paragraph Writing for ESL classes, requesting them to identify the problems they encountered outside of school that made taking ESL classes difficult, and problems they encountered in school. Major study findings included the following: (1) 37 students were enrolled in morning classes, and 68 in evening classes, with females outnumbering males in both groups; (2) 79.7% of the morning and evening students were single parents; (3) 77% of the day students and 53% of the evening students had children under 5; (4) 59.4% of the morning students and 37.8% of the evening students indicated that responsibilities for child care were an obstacle to taking ESL classes, and 35.1% of the morning students and 45.9% of the evening students listed lack of help with household duties as a difficulty; (5) the most commonly cited difficulties with school among morning students were hearing other languages in the English classroom, understanding the professor, and understanding academic advisers; (6) evening students cited understanding the readings, getting the wrong advice on courses to take, and understanding homework and written directions on tests as problems; and (7) 59.4% of the morning students and 50% of the evening students found problems dealing with forms and applications, registering for courses, and understanding academic advisors and financial aid consultants. The questionnaire is attached. (JMC)

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Problems Confronting Adults with English as a Second Language who Enroll in a Community College

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Mary Crepeau
December 17, 1991

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Discover and they will come! And they did come to a Field of Dreams. We can date immigration back to Columbus in 1492, or we can be more historically correct, and point to Leif Ericson. The era or the year is irrelevant. What is relevant is the fact that we have large numbers of men, women, and children who set their eyes on the Statue of Liberty decades ago and came here as immigrants. The flow has not ceased, and though our newcomers no longer go through Ellis Island, they nevertheless come in large numbers.

Recently, immigration has presented a challenge to our educational system. Why are there suddenly so many problems with the present wave of immigrants? Longfield, Savage, and Alamprese answer the question in a pamphlet entitled Adult Literacy: Focus on Limited-English-Proficient Learners. "Prior to the midseventies, refugees and immigrants were more educated and better prepared for the transition to a new life. Thus, in many cases the teaching/learning of ESL was sufficient. On the other hand, the 1979-and-later arrivals seem to have come from rural backgrounds, possessing few portable skills and arriving in the United States during a major recession with record unemployment" (11). Many of these immigrants look to the junior college for solutions. There are major issues and problems confronting adults with English as a second language who

try to better their conditions by enrolling in classes at a community college.

The problems have been explored by various studies on the junior college level. Stan Gilbert in his article, "Addressing the Needs of English-as-a-Second-Language Students" makes a strong case for the support services needed by foreign students who respond to the academic challenges of a new country. Janet Kayfetz et. al. focus on "the actual and expected performance of students in college-preparatory ESL courses," in a study entitled "Improving ESL Instruction for College-Bound Students. Final Report of the Project Conducted July 1, 1987, through June 30, 1988." Both these studies focus on the necessity of upgrading services available to immigrant students.

Researchers have also scrutinized the success rates of ESL candidates in post-secondary education. Of 6,993 students who enrolled at Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC), Marcia J. Belcher designated 884 as ESL and found: "Compared to the non-ESL students, ESL students were more likely to have left MDCC after four years and less likely to have graduated. 16% of the ESL enrollees finished the fourth level of the program with satisfactory grades; and less than 30% of the original ESL group passed the reading

and writing portions of the basic skills assessment test" (13). In 1988, Alice Gosak conducted a longitudinal study at San Jose City College (SJCC). It included 1,000 randomly chosen ESL students entering freshman year in the fall of 1982. By the spring of 1987, "24% of the entire group of 1,000 students 1.66% had earned associate degrees, and 4% had transferred to four-year institutions" (68).

Although these studies have initiated attempts to discover the needs of English-as-a-second-language students and to respond to them with improved academic and support services, no one seems to be listening to the students themselves. What are the major problems confronting adults with English as a second language who try to better their conditions by enrolling in classes at a community college? In a survey conducted at the Community College of Rhode Island Providence Campus, students gave their answers.

105 students enrolled in ESL I, ESL II, and Paragraph Writing for ESL were surveyed. The instrument used (Appendix A) to discover the demographics of the population and to explore difficulties was imitative of one used by Alpha Research Associates, Inc. in a previous survey of the same population. Some of the students, therefore, were familiar with the format of the questionnaire. In addition,

each question was explained to assure comprehension, and students received assistance in formulating additional problems not included in the checklist. They were told they could respond in French or Spanish, if necessary.

Results were obtained from 37 students enrolled in morning classes and 68 students enrolled in evening sessions. A demographic analysis surfaces some of the problems these students experience when they come to an institution of higher learning.

Age of student A.M.
N=37

	Number	Percent
1. under 20	2	5.4%
2. 20-24	10	27.0%
3. 25-29	3	8.1%
4. 30-34	9	24.3%
5. 35 +	13	35.1%
	37	100.0%

Age of student P.M.
N=68

	Number	Percent
1. under 20	11	16.2%
2. 20-24	14	20.6%
3. 25-29	21	30.9%
4. 30-34	8	11.7%
5. 35 +	14	20.6%
	68	100.0%

As can be seen in the profile of 37 students attending

day classes, 22 or 59.4% are over 30. In the evening classes, 22 students or 32.3% are over 30. Over one half of day students and almost one third of evening students fall between the ages of thirty and thirty five plus. Many have been away from formal education for 10 years or more. In addition to learning a new language, they must re-acclimate themselves to the world of academia.

Sex A.M. N=37		
	Number	Percent
1. Male	8	21.6%
2. Female	29	78.4%
	37	100.0%

Sex P.M. N=68		
	Number	Percent
1. Male	27	39.8%
2. Female	41	60.2%
	68	100.0%

Of the 37 students attending day classes, 8 or 21.6% are male and 29 or 78.4% are female. Of the 68 students attending evening classes, 27 or 39.8% are male and 41 or 60.2% are female. In both morning and evening classes, females far outnumber males. In private interviews, females often express a desire to learn English to communicate

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better with their children, with teachers, and with school officials. In addition, single females with children set high academic goals to achieve greater economic independence. Some face new challenges alone with an added burden of raising children without a husband.

Unlike young immigrants who enroll in elementary grades or high school, adult students often experience the burden of a household and children. These responsibilities diminish the time they can spend outside classes to enhance instruction they receive in a formal setting.

Marital status A.M.
N=37

	Number	Percent
1. Single	12	32.5%
2. Married	14	37.8%
3. Divorced	6	16.2%
4. Separated	5	13.5%
5. Widowed	0	0.0%
	37	100.0%

Marital status P.M.
N=68

	Number	Percent
1. Single	32	47.1%
2. Married	20	29.4%
3. Divorced	6	8.8%
4. Separated	10	14.7%
5. Widowed	0	0.0%
	68	100.0%

Dependent Children at home A.M. N=37		
	Number	Percent
1. None	6	16.2%
2. One	8	21.7%
3. Two	10	27.0%
4. Three	10	27.0%
5. Four +	3	8.1%
	37	100.0%

Dependent children at home P.M. N=68		
	Number	Percent
1. None	27	39.7%
2. One	18	26.5%
3. Two	11	16.2%
4. Three	7	10.3%
5. Four +	5	7.3%
	68	100.0%

17 of 37 students, 45.9% attending morning classes represent single parent families: 4 single subjects have 1 child; 1 has 2 children; 1 has 3 children and 1 has 4 children. of 6 divorced students: 3 have 2 children and 3 have 3 children. Of 5 separated students, 4 have children: 1 has 1 child; 1 has 2 children and 2 have 3 children.

23 of 68 students, 33.8%, attending evening classes represent single parent families: 6 single students have 1 child; 2 have 2 children and 1 has 4 children. Of 6 divorced students, 5 have children: 1 has 1 child; 3 have 3 children and 1 has 4 children. Of 10 separated students, 9 have children: 3 have 1 child; 2 have 2 children; 3 have 3

children and 1 has 4 children.

37 children of students in morning classes are being cared for by single parents. 48 children of students in evening classes are being cared for by single parents. 79.7% of morning and evening students must share time spent in learning English with caring for children without a partner to assist them.

The age of a child determines the amount of dependency upon the adult. The following charts profile the number of children age 5 or below who have parents in both day and evening classes.

Age of youngest child A.M.
N=37

	Number	Percent
1. under 3	14	47.0%
2. 3-5 yrs.	9	30.0%
3. 6-12 yrs.	7	23.0%
4. 13-18 yrs.	0	0.0%
	37	100.0%

Age of youngest child P.M.
N=68

	Number	Percent
1. under 3	14	34.2%
2. 3-5 yrs.	8	19.2%
3. 6-12 yrs.	14	34.2%
4. 13-18 yrs.	5	12.1%
	68	100.0%

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23 or 77% of day students and 22 or 53% of evening students have children age 5 or below. Because these dependents are not in a school setting, they must be cared for by parents during afternoon hours. Parents are often obliged to cut study time after 12:30 in morning sessions. Single students in evening sessions must depend on spouses or relatives for child care.

Other factors influencing the problems of ESL students occur when they must contribute to financial support. The following charts illustrate the number of students in both morning and evening classes whose work responsibilities may make attending classes more difficult:

Employment status A.M.
N=37

	Number	Percent
1. not working	21	56.8%
2. full time	10	27.0%
3. part time	6	16.2%
	37	100.0%

Employment status P.M.
N=68

	Number	Percent
1. not working	22	32.4%
2. full time	43	63.2%
3. part time	3	4.4%
	68	100.0%

21 students attending morning classes are not working: 20 are female and 1 is male. 10 have full time jobs: 4 are female and 6 are male. 6 have part time jobs: 5 are female and 1 is male. 43.2% of students attending morning classes have full or part time jobs.

23 students attending evening classes are not working: 15 are female and 8 are male. 42 students have full time jobs: 24 are female and 18 are male. 3 have part time jobs: 2 are female and 1 is male. 67.6% of students attending evening classes have full time or part time jobs. In addition to time expended in attending classes and completing assignments, these students spend 20 to 40 hours in the work force.

Job related and family responsibilities are not the only challenges for ESL students. They often find themselves in a classroom so diversified that the educational range extends from minimum to proficient. The following charts detail this diversity:

Educational status before coming to the U.S. A.M.
N=37

	Number	Percent
1. no elementary school	4	10.8%
2. elementary school	9	24.3%
3. high school	21	56.8%
4. college	3	8.1%
	37	100.0%

Educational status before coming to the U.S. P.M.
N=68

	Number	Percent
1. no elementary school	4	5.7%
2. elementary school	9	13.3%
3. high school	41	60.5%
4. college	14	20.5%
	68	100.0%

13 or 35.1% of students attending morning classes and 13 or 19.1% of students attending evening classes had not gone beyond elementary school in their own countries. Many students must struggle to obtain GED's (graduate equivalency diplomas) before or while attending classes at community colleges.

Diversity is also seen in the countries of origin and the number of years spent in the adopted country. The following charts present a clear profile of these two factors:

Country of origin A.M.
N=37

	Number	Percent
1. Bolivia	0	0.0%
2. Cambodia	0	0.0%
3. Cape Verde	1	2.7%
4. China	1	2.7%
5. Colombia	1	2.7%
6. Cuba	1	2.7%
7. Dominican Rebublic	19	51.4%

	Number	Percent
8. Greece	0	0.0%
9. Guatemala	2	5.4%
10. Haiti	1	2.7%
11. Honduras	0	0.0%
12. Hungary	0	0.0%
13. Korea	1	2.7%
14. Peru	0	0.0%
15. Portugal	0	0.0%
16. Puerto Rico	6	16.2%
17. Russia	3	8.1%
18. Senegal	0	0.0%
19. Venezuela	0	0.0%
20. Viet Nam	1	2.7%
	37	100.0%

Country of origin P.M.
N=68

	Number	Percent
1. Bolivia	1	1.5%
2. Cambodia	2	3.0%
3. Cape Verde	1	1.5%
4. China	1	1.5%
5. Colombia	5	7.3%
6. Cuba	1	1.5%
7. Dominican Republic	35	51.0%
8. Greece	1	1.5%
9. Guatemala	2	3.0%
10. Haiti	2	3.0%
11. Honduras	1	1.5%
12. Hungary	1	1.5%
13. Korea	1	1.5%
14. Peru	4	5.9%
15. Portugal	1	1.5%
16. Puerto Rico	6	8.8%
17. Russia	0	0.0%
18. Senegal	1	1.5%
19. Venezuela	2	3.0%
20. Viet Nam	0	0.0%
	68	100.0%

Number of years in the U.S. A.M. N=37			
		Number	Percent
1.	1/2	1	2.7%
2.	1	6	16.2%
3.	2	4	10.9%
4.	3	5	13.5%
5.	4	2	5.4%
6.	5	0	0.0%
7.	6	2	5.4%
8.	7	2	5.4%
9.	8	2	5.4%
10.	9	3	8.1%
11.	10	2	5.4%
12.	11	1	2.7%
13.	12	1	2.7%
14.	14	1	2.7%
15.	15	1	2.7%
16.	16	2	5.4%
17.	19	1	2.7%
18.	21	1	2.7%
19.	23	0	0.0%
		37	100.0%

Number of years in the U.S. P.M. N=68			
		Number	Percent
1.	1/2	4	5.7%
2.	1	3	4.4%
3.	2	14	20.5%
4.	3	9	13.3%
5.	4	4	5.7%
6.	5	4	5.7%
7.	6	2	3.0%
8.	7	7	10.2%
9.	8	4	5.7%
10.	9	1	1.5%
11.	10	7	10.2%
12.	11	2	3.0%
13.	12	4	5.7%
14.	14	0	0.0%
15.	15	0	0.0%
16.	16	0	0.0%
17.	19	1	1.5%
18.	21	1	1.5%
19.	23	1	1.5%
		68	100.0%

A study of these results adds several dilemmas. Some students must learn a completely new alphabet and method of writing as they learn their new language. In addition, classes contain students who have been here for under a year and some who have been here for up to two decades. It is true that those with greater proficiency will help newcomers learn faster, but newcomers must first overcome a sense of initial intimidation.

Other challenges emerge when students who are trying to gain English proficiency through ESL courses also enroll in content courses.

Are taking other college courses A.M. N=37			
		Number	Percent
1.	Yes	34	91.9%
2.	No	3	8.1%
		37	100.0%

Are taking other college courses P.M. N=68			
		Number	Percent
1.	Yes	55	80.8%
2.	No	13	19.2%
		68	100.0%

ESL students who are trying to earn associates degrees find difficulty with textbooks. Not only do they try to

decipher the English meaning, but they find themselves coping with specialized vocabulary: the language of sociology, psychology, anatomy, etc. The language of teachers is also beyond that already acquired by the immigrant student. Along with the speed at which teachers speak, this factor makes taking notes a near impossibility. Tests and papers introduce another hardship which often discourages the student or makes repeating courses inevitable.

The survey included a two-pronged checklist. Students were instructed to check those difficulties they encounter outside of school first. This section was followed by a list of possible difficulties encountered in school. Both segments allowed the students to add difficulties not listed.

Difficulties outside of school A.M.
N=37

	Number	Percent
1. my children require too much of my time	22	59.4%
2. there is no other adult to help me with household duties	13	35.1%
3. my partner does not encourage me		
4. transportation is difficult	6	16.2%
5. no difficulties	7	18.9%

Additional difficulties listed:		
child care is needed	5	13.5%
family and friends do not speak English	7	18.9%
not enough time for study and homework	5	13.5%
economic problems	1	2.7%

Difficulties outside of school P.M.
N=68

	Number	Percent
1. my children require too much of my time	14	37.8%
2. there is no other adult to help me with household duties	17	45.9%
3. my partner does not encourage me	7	18.9%
4. transportation is difficult	14	37.8%
5. no difficulties	25	67.5%
Additional difficulties listed:		
can't speak fluently	3	8.1%
no one to practice with	2	5.4%
economic problems	6	16.2%
physical exhaustion	7	18.9%

Results from this section were viewed with the following variables in mind: whether the students who checked difficulties are male or female, single parents or married, and whether they are working or not working.

22 students, 59.4%, in the morning classes, 19 females and 3 males, claim that children require too much time. 13 are single parents: 4 work full time or part time, and 9 do not work. 9 are married: 6 work part time or full time, and 3 do not work.

Results from evening students differed slightly. 20.5% or 14 students, 13 females and 1 male, spend too much time with children. 8 are single parents: 4 work full time or part time, and 4 do not work. 6 are married: 2 work full time or part time, and 4 do not work.

One conclusion from the study indicates that a day care service at the Providence campus is needed to help parents with dependents while they learn English. This service is provided at the Flanagan campus in Lincoln where students can leave their children at the center for part of the day or for all day. Additional comments by students attending morning classes emphasize that such a center should be established in Providence.

13 students, 35.1%, in the morning classes, 11 females and 2 males, express a sense of isolation in coping with household duties. 9 are single parents: 4 work full time or part time, and 5 do not work. 4 are married: 3 work full time or part time, and 1 does not work.

25% or 17 evening students, 13 females and 4 males, indicate that the absence of another adult inhibits their progress in learning English. 12 are single parents: 8 work full time or part time, and 4 do not work. 5 are married: 2 work full time or part time, and 3 do not work.

No students in morning classes find that partners are not encouraging their endeavors; however, in evening classes: 10.2% or 7 students, 2 females and 5 males, feel that the lack of encouragement contributes to their difficulties. 5 work full time or part time and 2 do not work.

Transportation is a more important factor for females. 6 in the morning classes and 10 in evening classes find commuting difficult. 4 males in the evening classes encounter this problem. Of the 6 students who attend morning classes, 2 work and 4 do not. Of the 14 students who attend evening classes, 11 work and 3 do not.

7 students, 4 females and 3 males in day classes and 25, 10 females and 15 males, in evening classes have no difficulties outside school.

Additional comments in both groups mention economic difficulties, the lack of English speaking friends or co-workers to practice with, and the lack of time for study and homework. Evening students are more prone to add physical exhaustion to difficulties they encounter.

The final checklist focused on possible difficulties ESL students may encounter in school. Once again, they had the opportunity to add to the given list.

Difficulties in school A.M.
N=37

	Number	Percent
1. understanding the professor	7	18.9%
2. understanding the readings	3	8.1%
3. understanding homework	4	10.8%
4. understanding written directions on tests	5	13.5%
5. hearing other languages in the English classroom	8	21.6%
6. dealing with forms and applications	3	8.1%
7. registering for courses	9	14.3%
8. understanding academic advisors	6	16.2%
9. understanding people in the financial aid office	4	10.8%
10. getting the wrong advice on which courses to take	5	13.5%
11. no difficulties	11	29.7%
Additional difficulties listed:		
class time is short	1	2.7%
unprepared for the course	1	2.7%
more help from the teacher with writing	1	2.7%
cannot understand English in the classroom	1	2.7%
embarassment for the student enrolled in courses other than ESL	1	2.7%

Difficulties in school P.M.
N=68

	Number	Percent
1. understanding the professor	3	4.4%
2. understanding the readings	14	20.5%
3. understanding homework	11	16.1%
4. understanding written directions on tests	11	16.1%
5. hearing other languages in the English classroom	6	8.8%
6. dealing with forms and applications	7	10.2%
7. registering for courses	11	16.1%
8. understanding academic advisors	10	14.7%
9. understanding people in the financial aid office	6	8.8%
10. getting the wrong advice on which courses to take	12	17.6%
11. no difficulties	6	8.8%

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Additional difficulties listed:		
understanding written directions in classes other than ESL	1	1.4%
can't speak fluently	1	1.4%
too many in the class	1	1.4%
the schedule of classes is not convenient	1	1.4%
a language lab would make learning English easier	10	14.7%
more materials are needed	2	2.9%

Information gathered from this section was studied with three variables in mind: whether students experiencing specific difficulties were enrolled in ESL I, in ESL II, or Paragraph Writing for ESL. The educational background and the number of years spent in the U.S. were also factors taken into consideration.

Of the 19 students in morning classes who found problems with the first 4 items on the check list, 16, 16 or 84.2% are enrolled in Paragraph Writing for ESL. Results from students in evening classes for the same 4 items differ slightly: 23 of 39 students or 58.9% enrolled in ESL II classes have problems understanding professors, readings, homework, and directions on tests. In addition, all students in both morning and evening classes who registered difficulty in these areas had educational backgrounds at the high school level or lower in their native countries. The number of years spent in the United States was not a variable. It can be concluded that the educational

backgrounds of adult immigrants is an important factor in learning a new language.

No distinct pattern emerged among students who listed item number 5, hearing other languages in the English classroom, as a difficulty. A total of both evening and day students indicates that 5 who experience this problem are enrolled in ESL I, 5 are enrolled in ESL II, and 4 are enrolled in Paragraph Writing for ESL. Educational backgrounds fall mostly at the high school level and the number of years spent in the country ranges from 1 to 21.

Students in both morning and evening classes encounter problems when they deal with the bureaucracy which surround registering and obtaining financial aid. 59.4% or 22 students enrolled in morning classes, and 50% or 34 students enrolled in evening classes find problems dealing with forms and applications, registering for courses, and understanding academic advisors and financial aid consultants. Of the 56 students who indicated difficulty in these areas, none had gone beyond high school in their native countries; 8 or 14.2% had elementary school diplomas, and 3 or 5.3% had not finished elementary school. The number of years spent in the United States was not a variable.

A total of 17 people, 16.1%, feel that they get the

wrong advice on which courses to take. Because so many ESL students, 91.9% in A.M. classes and 80.8% in P.M. classes are enrolled in other academic courses, it is likely that the students who checked this item as a difficulty are not referring to ESL courses.

19.7% or 11 students enrolled in morning classes and 8.8% or 6 students in evening classes experience no difficulty in school with ESL classes.

Additional comments reveal that 1 student enrolled in Paragraph Writing for ESL feels unprepared because she came to the course after having taken ESL I only. Though the test used to determine the appropriate level for English as a Second Language students seems effective, it could be broadened to include a wider range of skills. It might be useful to add a conversation element and a component to test cognitive skills.

4 students who added difficulties to the given list feel that class time is too short. Although the numbers are not overwhelming, the English department has addressed the issue by proposing that class time be doubled for ESL courses.

Additional comments indicate that 10 evening students would like a language lab to help them with English courses. Other additional comments included difficulty with writing,

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fluency and understanding English in the classroom; inconvenient schedule of classes; necessity for more instructional materials; large classes, and embarassment experienced in other than ESL classes.

The Field of Dreams continues to lure immigrants from everywhere. Despite great odds, they seek a better life first, by trying to become proficient in the language of the adopted homeland and then, by aspiring to higher education. Since the numbers are increasing, there is no doubt that higher education will have an even greater challenge responding to the needs of adult ESL students in the future. Institutions often try to better their programs by gathering impressions and evaluations culled from teachers, guidance counselors, and researchers. This method can result in introducing changes which have no relevance to those actually enrolled in classes. It may be wiser to listen to the voices of students we have today that we may enhance the learning of those we will have tomorrow.

APPENDIX A

1. Age: ___under 20 ___20-24 ___25-29 ___30-34 ___35+

2. Gender: ___Male ___Female

3. Marital status: ___Single ___Married ___Divorced
___Separated ___Widowed

4. Number of dependent children living with you: ___None ___One
___Two ___Three ___Four or more

5. Age of youngest child: ___Under 3 ___3-5 ___6-12 ___12-18

6. Current Employment status: ___Not working ___Full time
___Part time (20 hrs. a week or less)

7. Educational status before coming to the U.S.:
___did not complete elementary school
___completed elementary school
___completed high school
___completed college (university)

8. Country of origin: _____

9. Number of years in the U.S.: _____

10. In addition to ESL classes, are you taking other courses at the college level?
___Yes ___No

11. Following are some difficulties you may have with taking English courses. Check those that apply to your situation.
Difficulties outside of school:
___my children require too much of my time
___there is no other adult to help me with household duties
___my partner does not encourage me
___transportation

List other difficulties you may be having outside of school which make taking English classes difficult:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

12. Difficulties in school:

___understanding the professor

___understanding the readings

___understanding homework

___understanding written directions on tests

___hearing other languages in the English classroom

___dealing with forms and applications

___registering for courses

___understanding academic advisors

___getting the wrong advice on which courses to take

___understanding people in the financial aid office

List other difficulties you may be having in school which make taking English courses difficult:

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